



Robert "Bedford" Watkins, Jr.

July 27, 1925 - April 6, 2025

Dr. Robert "Bedford" Watkins, Jr., was born on July 27, 1925, in Keiser, Arkansas, to Robert B. Watkins, Sr. and Vera (Wyatt) Watkins. He passed away April 6, 2025 in Indianapolis, Indiana. He was preceded in death by his wife of 72 years, Eugenia Bowles Watkins; brother, David Wyatt Watkins; and sister, Laura Jo Lorenz. He is survived by his sons, Robert Bedford Watkins III and Thomas Wyatt Watkins; seven grandchildren, Chris Wyatt, Rachael Ledbetter, Rebecca Watkins, Seth Watkins, Sarah Olson, Kaitlyn Watkins, and Megan Watkins; and four great-grandchildren.

Bedford grew up in the small Arkansas town of Monette, where his father, a pharmacist, owned and operated a drugstore. It had an old-fashioned soda fountain, where Bedford worked as a soda jerk. He was taken with Boy Scouts, and though Monette had no functioning scout troop, Bedford became a "lone scout" and earned the rank of Eagle. He would serve as Scoutmaster of Troop 41, at the First Baptist Church of Bloomington, IL.

After briefly attending Peabody College, Nashville, TN, and still in his teens, Bedford enlisted in WWII, completed basic training, and was a gunner corporal in the 515th Field Artillery Battalion of the 7th Army, European Theater of Operations. Following the War, Bedford attended Southwestern at Memphis, now Rhodes College, on the GI Bill. There he met his future wife, Eugenia "Genie" Harris Bowles, a former Lieutenant JG in the Navy. A music major, after graduation, Bedford was invited to teach music theory at his alma

mater, before pursuing a master's degree in piano performance at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Following a brief tenure on the piano faculty at Winthrop College, SC, in 1956, Bedford accepted a tenure track professorship in music at Illinois Wesleyan University, in Bloomington, Illinois, where he made his career.

In 1963, Bedford earned a doctoral degree from the University of Iowa, Iowa City, in piano performance and musical composition. By then, he and Genie had two sons, Robert and Thomas. Bedford was an avid performer on piano, harpsichord and organ. He toured widely as a performer, on piano and especially harpsichord, educating and entertaining audiences and students at more than 25 college and universities in Eastern, Southern, and Midwestern states. He was an expert interpreter of Baroque style and performance practice.

Bedford was also a prolific composer of music in styles and forms ranging from sacred to choral to avantgarde, solo to instrumental to large orchestral. He made a point to compose for many of his university colleagues and joined them in performances of these works. He continued to compose through his retirement years, especially sacred pieces for the church.

A man of devout faith, Bedford played the organ at many churches, including for 25 years at the First Baptist Church of Bloomington, Illinois, and for 23 years at Trinity Episcopal Church, Apalachicola, Florida, where in both instances wife Genie directed the choral programs. An avid walker, Bedford traveled from home to university and back on foot each weekday for years, and from home to church on weekends. Later in life he took up running, and each year entered the Red Fish Run, winning in his age division-often as the only contestant in that division!

In 1988, Bedford and Genie retired to Apalachicola, Florida, residing on a bay near the Gulf of Mexico, alongside Genie's sisters and their husbands. There they enjoyed 23 years, with much of their time devoted to cultivating musical performances in Apalachicola and the surrounding area. While Genie led a choral society, concert series, and Episcopal church choir, Bedford

accompanied many of the concerts on these series, as well as church music. He cofounded the Trio Internationale, which performed widely in the area, and he also accompanied musical productions at the local theater.

Bedford, with his wife, Genie, was a frequent traveler abroad, numerous times on university sabbaticals, where he studied harpsichord and composed new music. Among their favorite countries were England and Scotland, Germany and Austria, Spain, Italy and Greece. In retirement, they traveled often to Eastern Europe, especially to the cities of Prague, Budapest, and Warsaw. They also traveled throughout the United States.

Bedford was also a prolific poet, whose poems have appeared in many publications. His book, "Remembering Armageddon: Reflections on a Century of War," features 21 poems that chronicle his own experiences in war, as well as reflections on war generally.

Bedford and Genie moved to Indianapolis in 2011, where son Thomas Wyatt resides. They lived in a home, then in an assisted living setting, and finally memory care. Losing Genie in 2018, Bedford continued on in his gentle way, beloved by family, church friends and caregivers. Bedford was a true Renaissance Man, yet down to earth and in love with the world, its art, beauty and wonder.

A memorial celebration will be held for Bedford on Sunday, June 1, 2025 at 3:00 p.m. at the Cumberland First Baptist Church, 116 S. Muessing Street, Indianapolis. Several of his works will be performed.

An Episcopal mass and interment of ashes service will follow at the Trinity Episcopal Church in Apalachicola, Florida on July 5, 2025.

Previous Events

Celebration of Life

JUN 1. 3:00 PM (ET)

Cumberland First Baptist Church
116 South Muessing Street
Cumberland, IN 46229

Tribute Wall

PG

“ I think of Dr Watkins all the time as I play piano. I learned so much from him at IWU. We stayed in touch at xmas until a couple years before Jeannie passed. When I transferred to IWU I'd been told to request him as my private teacher....so glad I did & he accepted me. He was a true southern gentleman. He & Jeannie are together again.

paulette george - August 13, 2025 at 05:23 PM

DW

“ We were snow birds from Wisconsin. How we enjoyed knowing Bedford and Eugenia, and singing with them in the Trinity choir and the Bay Area Choral Society. Blessings on their memory. Don and Helene West

Donald and Helene West - July 04, 2025 at 05:19 PM

RL

“ Robert L. planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of Robert "Bedford" Watkins, Jr..

Robert L. - May 29, 2025 at 02:17 PM